

# The Nation

## DEATH ON THE ROADWAYS

LOS ANGELES — One man died after being shot in the head while driving on a Los Angeles-area freeway, and a second motorist was hospitalized after a separate freeway attack. The two incidents are the latest in a string of Southern California freeway shootings in the past several weeks.



## IN FACT | Two others have been shot and killed in March on Southern California freeways.

Staff writer Juliet Eilperin will be online at noon to discuss Al Gore's new climate change campaign (article, A4), at [washingtonpost.com/liveonline](http://www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline).

## DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Shankar Vedantam

### Hillary Clinton and the Action Bias

**O**n Oct. 10, 2002, Hillary Rodham Clinton stood in the Senate to explain why she was authorizing President Bush to use force against Iraq. "In balancing the risks of action versus inaction, I think New Yorkers who have gone through the fires of hell may be more attuned to the risk of not acting. I know that I am."

As the war went from triumph to fiasco — the death toll in American lives crossed 4,000 last week — Clinton told angry Democrats that she had been misled by the Bush administration's selective use of intelligence about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. What she failed to say is that, by her own admission, her decision was the result of a powerful psychological bias.

The action bias, or the desire to do something rather than nothing when you have just been through a terrible experience, plays a powerful role in our lives. It influences individuals and companies, investors and leaders. You can see the action bias on display in current thinking on the housing and economic crises, in the bitter debates over the war in Iraq — even in discussions about how to fix a football team that's a perennial loser.

When people suffer losses and confront the possibility of even greater reverses — it doesn't matter if you are talking about a terrorist attack or a meltdown in retirement savings — it is psychologically difficult to do nothing, to hold course. This is true even when the action you contemplate produces an outcome that leaves you demonstrably worse than you were in the first place.

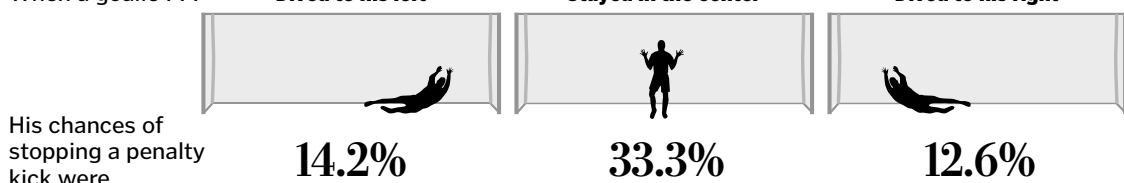
While the Iraq war might be Exhibit A for the action bias, the phenomenon is a familiar face in most presidential contests. Elections revolve around problems that the nation is confronting, so it is not surprising that candidates routinely spout the mantra of change. When things feel wrong, we experience a compelling attraction to a change of course — any change. This is the definition of the action bias.

Economist Ofer Azar recently came up with a novel way to study the insidious nature of the action bias. He examined whether soccer goalies were more likely to stop penalty kicks when they dived to the left, dived to the right or stayed in the center of the goal. In a study of 286 penalty kicks faced by elite Israeli goalkeepers, Azar found that goalies had the best chance of stopping a kick when they remained in the center — partly because when they dived to

## Do Just Stand There

Although research shows that soccer goalies have the best odds of stopping penalty kicks when they stay in the middle of the goal, they invariably dive to one side or the other.

When a goalie . . .



His chances of stopping a penalty kick were . . .

SOURCE: Journal of Economic Psychology

one side, they left themselves with no chance of stopping a kick aimed at the other side or a kick aimed dead center. And even when they correctly guessed the direction of the kick, they still had only a 1-in-4 chance of stopping a goal.

Despite the clarity of the evidence, Azar found that goalies dived to one side or the other 93 percent of the time.

During the 2006 World Cup soccer championship, which ended after a nine-penalty-kick shootout between Italy and France, both the French and Italian goalies dived to one side or the other every single time. Neither got so much as a hand on the ball. The goalies failed to correctly guess the direction of the penalty kick seven times (including two that were dead center) and failed to stop goals the two times that they did guess right. Italy won only because one of France's penalty kicks hit the crossbar.

Azar, who works at the Guilford Glazer School of Business and Management at Ben-Gurion University in Israel, believes that goalies, like politicians and Federal Reserve chairmen who have to decide on whether to change interest rates, are powerfully influenced by norms. In bad times — and it doesn't matter whether you are trying to stop penalty kicks or a recession — the norm is to act. If you're a goalie, you dive to one side. If you are chairman of the Fed, you cut rates. If you are a politician trying to head off a terrorist attack, you gravitate toward action.

One of the insights produced by Azar and Marcel

Zeelenberg, a social psychologist at Tilburg University in the Netherlands who also studies the action bias, is that different biases are activated in good and bad times. When things are going badly, it is difficult to choose inaction. When things are going well, however, it is difficult to make any changes — because who wants to be blamed for ruining something that is going well?

This is why, when your stock portfolio is performing spectacularly, the powerful temptation is to leave it exactly the way it is, rather than sell and take profits. But when your stocks are doing poorly, there is a powerful urge to cut and run. Buying high and selling low is a poor investment strategy, but it makes perfect psychological sense.

The same phenomenon is at work when it comes to people's beliefs about their careers and relationships. When things are going well, there is a tendency to stagnate, rather than innovate and make things even better. When things are going poorly, on the other hand, our bias is to flail.

In the aftermath of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the action bias explains why Clinton and most U.S. politicians were biased toward action — any action. Trying something that failed was psychologically preferable to facing accusations of "having done nothing."

Zeelenberg rhetorically summed up the fear that drove America's leaders in the run-up to the Iraq war: "What good is a politician who lets bad things happen to people?"

## THE ROLE OF REGRET

Paul owns shares in Company A. During the past year he considered switching to stock in Company B, but he decided against it. He now finds out that he would have been better off by \$1,200 if he had made the switch. George owned shares in Company B. During the past year he switched to stock in Company A. He now finds out that he would have been better off by \$1,200 if he had not done anything. Who feels more regret?

Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky posed this question many years ago to a group of volunteers. They found that although both Paul and George lost the same amount of money and for the same reason — they owned stock in Company A rather than Company B — most volunteers believed George would experience more regret than Paul, because George's loss was the result of his action, whereas Paul's loss was the result of inaction.

When something bad happens to us as a result of our actions, we kick ourselves harder than when bad things happen to us because of our inactions. As a result, because people want to minimize regret in their lives, Kahneman and Tversky argued that people were more likely to prefer inaction over action.

Marcel Zeelenberg at the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands, however, showed in a more recent psychological experiment that volunteers who were asked to play the role of a soccer coach pursued opposite strategies when they had a winning streak vs. a losing streak. When their teams were winning, the desire to avoid regret prompted the "coaches" to keep teams the way they were. When teams were losing, however, the desire to avoid regret prompted the "coaches" to prefer change. In each case, Zeelenberg argued, volunteers followed strategies that were the least likely to cause them regret — rather than strategies that were most likely to produce victory.

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## After Filing for Bankruptcy, Aloha Airlines to Halt Flights

By AUDREY MCAVOY  
Associated Press

HONOLULU, March 30 — Aloha Airlines said Sunday that it will halt all passenger service after Monday, signaling the end of an airline that has served Hawaii for more than 60 years.

Aloha, which filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on March 21, was a casualty of fierce competition and rising fuel prices. The airline said it will stop taking reservations for flights after Monday.

"We simply ran out of time to find a qualified buyer or secure continued financing for our pas-

senger business," David A. Bannmiller, Aloha's president and chief executive, said in a statement. "We had no choice but to take this action."

Aloha has suffered since Phoenix-based Mesa Air Group launched an inter-island carrier called Go airlines in 2006, triggering a local airfare war.

Bannmiller didn't mention Go by name in his statement, but did blame the company's demise on rival companies.

"Unfortunately, unfair competition has succeeded in driving us out of business," he said.

The company's Web site, [www.alohaairlines.com](http://www.alohaairlines.com), also announced the end of service.

Rising fuel prices, which have forced other airlines to raise fares and look for ways to cut expenses, also made it difficult for Aloha to operate. Aloha, the second-largest Hawaii carrier, has operated a fleet of 26 Boeing 737s to serve five airports statewide and six mainland U.S. destinations.

Aloha Airgroup was forced to file for Chapter 11 protection just over two years after it emerged from a previous trip through bankruptcy court.

Aloha said tickets for flights after Monday will not be honored. It said it is working to have UAL's United Airlines accommodate passengers with tickets for Aloha's mainland-to-Hawaii flights. It hopes to seat those with inter-island tickets on Hawaiian Airlines.

Aloha has canceled Monday flights from Hawaii to the West Coast and between several cities in California and Nevada. Its last day for inter-island travel will be Monday.

Aloha advised passengers who do not want to fly another airline and who want a refund to contact their travel agents or credit card companies. Those who paid by cash or check may file a claim in bankruptcy court.

The shutdown will affect about 1,900 employees. The company said air cargo services are to continue.

A Seattle company on Thursday offered to buy Aloha's cargo operations for an undisclosed amount. But Saltchuk Resources said it wasn't interested in taking over Aloha's passenger business.

Aloha Airlines was founded in 1946.

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